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Caution: Identity Under Construction: Adolescence on the Social Network

Over the past decade, technological advance has deeply impacted upon modes of human communication. Ellis et al (2016) recently explored the creation of what they term a 'surveillance society' in the pages of this publication, largely located within the information that people share through social networking. While this is clearly of concern to networked populations in general, psychological and neurological evidence suggests young people's personalities are more fledgling and fragile than those of mature adults, and consequently, the nature of such interaction may be potentially more damaging to children and young people than to mature adults. This raises a range of issues with respect to online safeguarding of people under eighteen: the age at which the internationally agreed United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child places the transition to adulthood (NSPCC 2016).

The mass social networking phenomenon has only just reached the end of its first decade. The first iPhone was released in 2006, the same year as Facebook became generally available to anyone over thirteen. Due to such recency, there are as yet no definitive empirical findings to indicate whether social networking is harmful, only emerging findings that some users have reported symptoms of addiction (Griffiths 2013).

Boyd (2014) identifies four aspects of networked information that may be viewed as either benefits or drawbacks, depending upon the purposes of the user:

- Persistence- durability of content
- Visibility- breadth of potential audience
- Spreadability- the ease with which content is shared
- Searchability- the ability to locate content through sophisticated search engines such as Google.

All of these features have the potential to create problems for the ongoing identity formation processes of young people within the consequent "glass box" of a socially networked environment. Turkel (2011) reflects upon the classic psychoanalytic identity theory of Erik Erikson, who emphatically proposed that adolescence should be a period in which young people should be free to experiment with their identities without enduring consequence. She raises grave concerns about the lack of such provision for the current generation of young people in post-industrial societies.

As Ellis et al (2016) point out, this image invokes the Foucaultian concept of the prisoner surveillance 'Panopticon' (Foucault 1979); however Rayner (2012) proposes that the surveillance experienced by contemporary young people goes far beyond such a 'prisoner and guard' context, in that all users of a social network constantly surveil *each other*: 'there are no guards and no prisoners in Facebook's virtual Panopticon. We are both guards and prisoners, watching and implicitly judging one

another' (Rayner 2011: online). Turkel (2011) found that many of her research participants were painfully aware of such visibility, but were willing to sacrifice privacy for the sake of connectivity. In a pilot study carried out with a small sample of participants aged between twelve and eighteen, the author found a similar attitude, embodied in the participant comment that teenagers are compelled to regularly log on to social networks due to '*a fear of missing out on things if they don't have it*' (Jarvis 2017, forthcoming).

But why would this be? Boyd (2014) proposes that contemporary western teenagers experience highly organised and restricted lives due to heightened parental concern relating to environmental danger, and the focus upon academic and sporting achievement in highly competitive neo-liberal cultures; consequently young people deeply invest in social media as their major venue for simply "hanging out". The issue of adult "colonisation" of children's lives is discussed at length in Jarvis et al (2014); however the suitability of the online environment as a forum for young people to engage in the intensive identity construction that takes place during adolescence has not yet been effectively explored by social scientists.

Recent advances in biopsychology have offered some support to earlier psychoanalytic concepts of a fragile "under construction" adolescent identity. It has been shown that in the neuronal sense, human beings are not fully adult until their mid-twenties, with a great deal of bio-psychological development occurring during the early adolescent period. The ways in which neuronal connections are made during this process are heavily dependent upon experiences encountered (Blakemore and Mills 2014).

This creates a highly socially vulnerable model of the human adolescent. Blakemore and Mills (2014) cite additional empirical evidence that suggests when adolescents find themselves in socially complex situations they are likely to make more risky decisions than both adults and younger children. The suggestion is that the adolescent period of development is concerned with building self-awareness in order to better integrate individuals' own self-judgements with peer evaluation. In order to do this, young people need to experiment with identity both alone and in interaction with each other. This process leads them to paradoxically become on the one hand hypersensitive to the opinions of others, and on the other, to take social risks that they would never consider during earlier and later stages of their lives. The learning that takes place through this process facilitates individuals' emergence into adulthood 'equipped to navigate the social complexities of their community' (Blakemore and Mills:189).

Where such processes are carried out in the online glass box offered by social networking sites, the unrelenting digital footprint consequently created cements every misjudgement and social error in perpetuity, creating a range of social hazards for young people as they move through this stage of development (Schurigin O'Keeffe et al 2011). Harris (2014) cites the case of Amanda Todd, a 15 year old

Canadian who was blackmailed into uploading nude pictures of herself, and subsequently committed suicide in response to the deluge of peer censure and teasing that followed. Even moving schools did not curtail this, as her new peer group swiftly accessed online records created by her previous activities. The persistence, visibility and spreadability of Todd's networked activity meant that she would always be vulnerable with respect to this digital footprint, and in realisation of this from her highly socially sensitised adolescent perspective, she decided that consequently, she did not wish her life to continue. While the young women in the pilot study carried out by the author did not cite such dramatic concerns, one commented that in using Facebook from the age of 15, she had presumed that *'the default setting would be "only your friends can see this stuff" but it's not, it's like friends of friends and that sort of thing'*, and that consequently, three years later, at the age of 18, she only just changed her Facebook settings to rectify the situation (Jarvis 2017, forthcoming).

The persistence of information committed to social networks also raises another albeit less dramatic issue for adolescents, that of the 'tethered' identity (Turkel 2011). Where individuals from previous generations typically formed a number of ephemeral friendships during adolescence which waxed and waned as an inevitable consequence of growing up and moving on, social networking provides an environment in which if nothing is actively done to cut such ties (the Facebook action referred to as 'unfriending', which can have socially awkward implications), young people remain forever tethered through social networks to people who are no longer part of their everyday lives, and with whom they may have little in common.

Additionally, as Turkel (2011) points out, equipped with a networked mobile device, support and direction from parents and friends to whom young people are digitally tethered is constantly available; therefore teenagers no longer routinely find themselves in situations in which they have only the self to depend upon; for example getting lost on unfamiliar streets or dealing with a difficult interaction with a stranger.

The deluge of information that arrives through social networking on mobile devices is a formidable challenge for a species which evolved to pay concentrated attention (Levitin 2015), and again, this is of particular concern for those who are in the psychologically vulnerable stage of constructing the intricate neuronal architecture required to cope with adult social interaction, in which a relatively stable self concept and considered prediction of potential responses from others is essential. In order to cope with a heavy volume of socially networked communication, we are led to reduce the depth and complexity of our messages. Harris (2014) comments that this feature of social networking creates a paradox of 'on tap' streams of connectivity that are highly appealing to deeply entrenched human social instincts, alongside a consequent lack of time for deep connection. This point is clearly not lost on some teenagers. One of the participants in the author's pilot study, commented as she reflected upon her day-to-day social networking activities *'when you say it out loud,*

when you have to explain it, it sounds like the most narcissistic thing' (Jarvis 2017, forthcoming).

However, to thoroughly work through intricate identity formation processes, teenagers need time and space for long, meaningful conversations with their peers and some amount of in-depth debate with parents and other emotionally bonded adults, interspersed with solitary reflection.

The indication that such relentless connectivity is potentially addictive to a species that has evolved to rely so heavily upon its capacity for social interaction is also of concern. Human responses to message notification sounds from networked devices resemble animal responses within operant conditioning contingencies (McMahon 2015). The most powerful reinforcement for such a highly social creature is a signal that others are seeking contact, raising levels of dopamine and oxytocin within the physical brain (Ritvo 2012). As Boyd (2014:80) poignantly comments: 'most teens aren't addicted to social media; if anything, they are addicted to one another'. Indeed, such effects may be heightened during adolescence, due to potentially enhanced effects of external stimuli during this life stage (Ernst et al 2011), and the compelling need for peer feedback (Blakemore and Mills 2014).

While it is clearly prudent to warn young people about risky online behaviours, the nature of the adolescent stage of development means that they remain highly vulnerable to being drawn into incautious over-sharing; empirical evidence suggests that during adolescence, the neuronal mechanisms that mediate social caution are muted in order to facilitate experiences that enhance social learning and consequently, identity construction processes (Blakemore and Mills 2014). Turkel's (2011) participants additionally raised the problem of information persistence, leaving them unable to leave the person that they were in adolescence behind, describing an ongoing sense of unease about embarrassing information that their teenage self may have left lurking in cyberspace, and the social awkwardness that they feel when they attempt to cut ties to outgrown friendships. One commented "I feel that my childhood has been stolen by the internet".

While online socialisation may be experienced by young people as a means of escape from adult control, they paradoxically enter into an environment which extends the potential for panoramic surveillance. Human beings are above all, intensely social creatures. While online interaction offers us huge benefits with respect to the instant sharing of some types of information, for example that associated with research or professional techniques, we are highly vulnerable to being drawn by our powerful social instincts into this enduring digital "glass box" in which what we share can become an instrument of social enslavement. This is of particular concern for those who enter at an age when the personality is still under construction, and they are not sufficiently neurally or psychologically mature to effectively consider what should be shared and what should not; indeed during a stage where incautious social behaviour is a core feature of the routine

developmental process. 'While none of these conflicts about self presentation are new to adolescence... what is new is living them out in public, sharing every mistake and false step' (Turkel 2011:186).

The implication is that, over the past decade, young people have been recruited into a mass social experiment at a highly vulnerable stage of their development, which enticed them to commit a significant amount of highly personal information to a worldwide database, freezing their adolescent social experiments and errors within the most public forum imaginable. This may have negative effects upon lifelong mental health, potentially creating an insidious anxiety from which, if no action is taken to permanently delete such data, they will never be free. It is of course possible that future generations confronted with such a history may indeed be more cautious, possibly due to increased adult surveillance of their online activities. But if they continue to lack free time for "real life" association, might this mean that they will *never* be free to construct a deep multi-faceted, human identity due to fears of exposure; restricted by circumstance to experiencing the self and others through shallow, sterile online profiles? From this perspective, it could be argued that the worst may be yet to come. The recent launch of a Facebook "lifestage app" marketed for young people was recently criticised by the BBC due to its lax privacy settings (BBC 2016).

The question that now arises for psychologists is whether the social networking environment can be empirically demonstrated to be a particularly inappropriate environment for young people and if so, how they might subsequently be better protected in this respect. The instigation of such research is clearly supported by Article 36 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child that states 'Children should be protected from any activity that... could harm their welfare and development' (UNICEF 1989 online). However, researchers would also need to be mindful of children and young people's rights under Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 15 (free association) and Article 17 (accessing information). Kelly (2001:30) comments that 'Youth is principally about becoming'. The view from this developmentally informed perspective indicates that, in the light of existing and potential technological development, it is time to call for the instigation of an international discussion that explicitly considers the creation of suitable physical, temporal *and* online spaces purposely designed to nurture this process.

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